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Obituaries

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## Promise and pitfalls seen in black box

By [Harry Stoffer](#)

Automotive News / September 17, 2001

**WASHINGTON** - A panel of experts has concluded that widespread use of black boxes in cars and trucks would advance motor vehicle safety, but added that thorny questions remain about self-incrimination and privacy.

The panel, which included representatives of industry, academia and government, studied event data recorders, or black boxes, for three years. It was done at the behest of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. An 89-page report quietly was made public Sept. 4.

The group was supposed to gather information, not make recommendations. But the findings lean heavily in favor of black boxes for cars and trucks.

"Event Data Recorders have the ability to profoundly impact highway safety," the panelists wrote. "EDRs can assist in real-world data collection, better define safety problems and aid law enforcement's understanding of crash specifics."

They said potential benefits include better design of occupant protection systems and improved accuracy of crash reconstruction.

### Influence on drivers

Studies of black boxes have shown that driver awareness of devices being used tends to reduce the number and severity of crashes, the panel said.

But the key to gaining public acceptance is convincing motorists that black boxes will help protect them from harm rather than get them penalized for mistakes, the report says.

Mike Cammisa, director of safety for the Association of International Automobile Manufacturers and a member of the study panel, said greater use of black boxes in cars and trucks is all but inevitable.



"Once they resolve the privacy issues, (the recorders) will not add a great deal to the price of a vehicle but they will add value for all road users and vehicle users," he said.

Black box technology has spread from aviation to shipping and railroading. And vehicle fleet operators are gathering data from vehicles about how they are operated.

### Are rules needed?

General Motors installs airbag-linked modules in many vehicles that record data for a few seconds before impact, including vehicle speed, engine

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speed, throttle position and brake switch status to indicate whether the brake lights had gone on.

The National Transportation Safety Board, an independent agency that investigates transportation disasters, has been recommending since 1997 that NHTSA gather more and better real-world crash data. The safety board said the plan should include "utilizing current or augmented sensing and recording devices."

But NHTSA has twice rejected petitions asking for rules to require black boxes. It said that the industry is moving voluntarily toward greater use of recording devices and that the subject "presents some issues that are, at least for the present time, best addressed in a non-regulatory context."

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